

Why the Marine Corps should say no to TacAir Integration

Subject Area Aviation

EWS 2006

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Contemporary Issue Paper  
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6 February 2006

<b>Report Documentation Page</b>			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE <b>06 FEB 2006</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006</b>			
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> <b>Why the Marine Corps should say no to TacAir Integration</b>			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> <b>United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development,Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street,Quantico,VA,22134-5068</b>			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b>					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> <b>12</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

In the 2002 Fall edition of Wings of Gold, Lieutenant General M. Hough, Deputy Commandant for Aviation stated, "TACAIR integration will allow the Marine Corps to better meet our 21<sup>st</sup> century requirements while simultaneously increasing efficiencies, unifying our core Naval Aviation competencies, and maintaining our unique Marine expeditionary culture."<sup>1</sup> This statement is incorrect. The Marine Corps must bring TacAir integration to an end in order to maintain the current capability of Marine TacAir and preserve the culture of Marine Aviation.

### Background

TacAir integration is the combining of fixed wing tactical jet aircraft between the Marine Corps and the Navy. The TacAir Integration plan (TAI) implements Navy F/A-18C squadrons into the Marine Corps Unit Deployment Program (UDP) and implements Marine Corps F/A-18 A+/C squadrons into ten carrier air wings.<sup>2, 3</sup> Currently the Marine Corps has fourteen active duty F/A-18 A+/C/D squadrons. The Navy has thirty active duty strike fighter fleet squadrons. Of the fourteen squadrons the Marine Corps has, four squadrons are currently integrated into Navy Carrier Air Wings (CVW).<sup>4</sup> Of the fourteen F/A-18 squadrons, only eight are of the single seat variant and are able to integrate into the CVW. Due to airframe and

fuel constraints, the Marine F/A-18D's cannot deploy aboard carriers.<sup>5</sup>

Marine TacAir exists to support the GCE. Navy TacAir exists to coordinate offensive and defensive air operations, attacking air, surface, and subsurface targets afloat and ashore and to support other forces. The Marine Corps traditionally operates from the land bases, while the Navy operates from aircraft carriers.

#### **Fewer Aircraft Equals Less Capability**

TacAir integration will decrease the total number of aircraft required by 497.<sup>6</sup> While this reduction will save the government billions of dollars, it will be at a significant cost to the Marine Corps.<sup>7</sup> The Navy hired an independent civilian contractor, Whitney Bradley and Brown (WB&B), to conduct analysis on the feasibility of integrating Marine and Navy TacAir. Whitney Bradley and Brown found that integrating the services tactical aviation assets would save twenty-eight billion over the next eighteen years however WB&B overlooked numerous issues.<sup>8</sup> The proponents of the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) say that due to the newer technology and the reliability of the JSF, fewer aircraft will be needed. This will only hold true for the first few years of service. The same was said of the F/A -18 when it was first introduced. Just like a new

car, a new aircraft may operate at a high level of efficiency for a few years, but after a few years of continuous use it will become less efficient. Squadrons currently have twelve aircraft in a squadron. The current requirement is to maintain readiness at 80% full mission capable during combat.<sup>9</sup> This leaves only ten aircraft to generate sorties. If the squadrons are cut to ten aircraft, then they have only eight aircraft to do the same amount of work. Cutting the number of aircraft will save money now, but commanders will be left with lower readiness numbers and lower capabilities in the future.<sup>10</sup>

The Navy's independent contractor, Whitney Bradley and Brown, and many proponents of the JSF, believe that the JSF will be so advanced fewer aircraft will be required to provide the same level of air power.<sup>11</sup> The F/A-18 has become remarkably accurate with GPS precision guided munitions, the litening targeting Pod, and laser guided bombs. The JSF will have a similar weapon capability as the F/A-18, but will have lesser payload capability.<sup>12</sup> Supporters say that the stealth achieved with the JSF will be a force multiplier, but with stealth an aircraft will only carry two 1000 lb bombs.<sup>13</sup> While this will allow an aircraft the ability to strike targets and remain undetected, only two targets can be destroyed with one

aircraft. When external ordnance is added to aircraft then the combat multiplier of stealth is lost.

### **Navy Ground Combat Training**

TacAir integration will cause a loss of security at Marine expeditionary airfields.<sup>14</sup> TacAir integration calls for Navy squadrons attaching to a Marine Air Group (MAG) and deploying. While this implementation seems simple, there are numerous shortfalls. The MAW/MAG typically provides internal security for forward airfields. This capability is inherent to Marine culture as every Marine is a rifleman and receives substantial ground combat training. Navy squadron personnel do not receive adequate ground combat training to conduct security missions. The security of airfields comes from the Marines in the squadrons and other attached units. Navy NBC training is deficient as well. The Navy sailors are trained to operate aboard ships, not at forward deployed airfields. If Navy squadrons deploy with the MAGs then there will be an increase load on the already overworked and over tasked Marines.<sup>15</sup>

### **Training and Proficiency**

With the ever increasing work load, pilots are constantly fighting to preserve precious flight time in order to accomplish the training required to meet the

Fighter Attack squadrons' missions. Pilot proficiency will decrease with TAI. It is currently difficult enough to find the time and resources to train a squadron of eighteen to twenty pilots, not to mention the twenty weapon system operators (WSO) as well. The four Marine squadrons that are already integrated into the Navy air wings have experienced the difficulty of training and maintaining pilots in the core competency of the F/A-18 training syllabus. TAI would mean more Marine squadrons conducting carrier work ups. During the work ups, the Marine TacAir squadron's readiness goes down due to the inability to train to the Marine Corps training and readiness standards. Operating from a carrier imposes numerous constraints on squadrons. This limits the amount of quality tactical training that can be accomplished while at sea for work ups. Marine pilots have a reputation for being experts in the tactics of close air support more than any other aviator. In the end, TAI will decrease the readiness of Marine Corps Fighter Attack squadrons and decrease the proficiency of pilots in the CAS mission.<sup>16</sup>

#### **MAGTF Commander Loses Internal TacAir Support**

All of the above limitations and probable issues add to the MAGTF commander losing his organic air support. The Navy's Fleet Readiness Program will require more squadrons

to remain at a higher state of readiness for longer periods of time. The fleet readiness program requires an increase in the Marine Corps squadrons' equipment and personnel in order to deploy with a carrier air wing.<sup>17</sup> The Marine Corps does not currently possess the personnel capability to man multiple squadrons to the T/O required for a carrier deployment.<sup>18</sup> The increase in personnel required will affect the training that is conducted with the GCE at the combined arms exercise (CAX). For example, MAG-11 is composed of VMFA-232, VMFA-314, VMFA-323, VMFA(AW)-121, VMFA(AW)-225, and VMFA(AW)-242. Out of the above squadrons, only the first three squadrons are able to deploy aboard a carrier. Based on current deployment cycles, two of the single seat squadrons are attached to CVW's, either deployed or working up for deployment. At least one F/A-18D squadron is on UDP while a second is getting ready for UDP. This currently allows the MAG to have three squadrons to provide training support to ground forces for CAS training and CAX. If more Marine squadrons implement into the CVW's, then the MAG will have even less support to give during peace time. During a war or conflict, the MAG will have a decrease in its combat capability with a Navy squadron attached. As stated earlier, Navy personnel do not receive the level of combat

ground training that Marines receive, they would be a liability. The Navy pilots, while very professional and capable, do not understand or appreciate CAS to the same degree that Marine pilots do.<sup>19</sup> The MAGTF commander will lose organic air support in both peacetime operations and conflicts abroad if TAI is allowed to progress.

### Conclusion

Since the inception of Marine Aviation, Marine pilots have prided themselves on being experts in CAS. The MAGTF commander, GCE commander, and other services have relied upon Marine TacAir to provide the highest and most professional level of CAS available to the troops on the ground. If Marine Corps senior leadership allows TAI to continue, the Marine Corps will lose its current TacAir capability and in turn, lose the ability of Marine TacAir to provide close air support.

### **Update**

After this paper was written and after subsequent updates to the research, the Marine Corps has, for now, decided against TacAir integration. The Marine Corps currently implements two F/A-18C squadrons on both the east coast and the west coast into a Carrier Air Wing. The future plan is to maintain this level of integration with the Carrier Air Wings. At this time, it is not known what will come of the Navy's F/A-18 squadrons implementing into the UDP cycle.

## **Notes**

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